

Better Know an HRD Scholar: A Conversation with Verna Willis

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Presented at: International Research Conference of the *Academy of Human Resource
Development*, Schaumburg, Illinois. February 2010.

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Abstract

This paper contains a conversation with Verna Willis, and is part of a series that focuses on different HRD scholars – the aim being to better understand the people behind the names we see in print. Verna was at Georgia State University from 1988 to her retirement in 2004, and led the Georgia State program to an Outstanding HRD Academic Program Award in 1997. She was on the first Board of the AHRD, and is known as the founder of the Chief Learning Officer concept. Prior to academia, Verna was an HRD practitioner for more than 20 years.

Keywords: Verna Willis, HRD scholars, Academy of Human Resource Development

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The Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD) was started in 1993, and has since brought together a large number of scholars with the combined vision of leading the HRD profession through research (see Swanson & Holton, 2009, for more on the history of AHRD). AHRD members have a wonderful opportunity to learn from the experiences of senior scholars who attend conferences and publish in the Academy journals. This paper is part of a series that aims to better understand the people behind these names we see in journals and conference papers by examining their career histories, motivations, and histories. This follows in the traditions of others who have explored career histories in other professions (see Roworth-Stokes & Perren, 2000; Harrow & Mole, 2005; Hareli & Klang, 2008). Over time, I will analyze all of these conversations to identify cross-cutting themes and lessons learned. However, this is not the purpose of this paper – which focuses on one person.

This paper contains a conversation with Verna J. Willis. Verna was an Associate Professor of Human Resource Development (HRD) at Georgia State University from 1988 to her retirement in 2004. Verna led the Georgia State HRD faculty to a "most outstanding" HRD academic program designation, which was awarded by the Academy of Human Resource Development in 1997. She was on the first Board of the Academy of Human Resource Development, and is known as the founder of the Chief Learning Officer concept that is now prevalent in organizations around the world. Prior to her career in academia, Verna had more than 20 years of experience as a practitioner working in the United States, Qatar and Indonesia. She has written widely on many topics, and most recently is best known for her work on action learning.

Methodology

I select interview participants based on very personal reasons: I interview those who have most influenced and inspired me through their engagement with AHRD. I approach interviewees with a request to participate that includes a list of sample questions which are used as a reference during the interviews but do not structure or limit the conversation.

The conversations with Verna were conducted by phone on June 1 and 4, 2010. The conversations were recorded, transcribed, and then edited to meet the word count limit for the AHRD conference. The editing retained the spirit and voice from the conversations. The edited version was reviewed by Verna prior to conference submission, and a few minor errors or omissions were corrected.

I hope you find what follows to be as interesting and useful as I do.

The Conversation

Darren: I like to start my conversations by asking people if they would be willing to walk me through their careers. So, would you be okay to start at whatever you consider the beginning, and to take me through the main steps in your career?

Verna: Perhaps a good place to begin is at a very early point in my life, which is where I started to develop my understanding of how people learn. My parents were born in the 1890's and had no formal schooling beyond ninth grade, all acquired in one-room rural schools. But they were omnivorous readers, and they read aloud in the evenings to each other and to their seven children. Learning through reading and talking about what we read was always a communal affair, not a matter solely of simple bedtime stories. Some of my earliest memories were of the lovely rhythms and sounds of words my parents articulated by the light of kerosene lamps and later, Coleman lanterns. I then went to a one-room school myself, through the seventh

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grade. Learning was always fun and a grand adventure. Even as the lessons grew more complicated, I felt as if it was a welcome challenge to wend my way through them. This was before behaviorism ruled in instructional design, and while there were milestones, there were no behavioral objectives. We zoomed all over the disciplines and I have come to feel, in retrospect, that we were learning naturally, holistically, and with a great deal of self-organization and self-direction.

Darren: It sounds like your early childhood influenced how you came to view adult learning and development.

Verna: Yes. Growing up on a farm established a sense of ecological relationships. It seems to me that I always knew that everything was interwoven with and inter-dependent upon everything else, so that when I encountered General System Theory in my doctoral program at SUNY Buffalo, it was not news to me. Systems thinking has been the primary cognitive strategy that I have used throughout my personal and professional life. These cradle-to-grave concepts have been crucial to my undertaking, understanding, practicing, and academic efforts in Human Resource Development.

Darren: Did this early understanding of learning and development influence your early career choices?

Verna: My first career goal, which I developed in high school, was to be a scientist. So I entered Alfred University in New York State as a biology major and learned all about anatomy, dissections, slicing and staining tissues, embryology, and in functioning of the bodies of whole but differentiated organisms. I discovered the difference between *pure* and *applied sciences* and embraced the intellectual and ethical rigors of the scientific method. Then World War II ended and, interrupting my degree program, I married a home-coming warrior. Seventeen years and

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seven children later, I had completed a bachelor's degree and a Master's degree in English, earned a New York State secondary school English teaching certificate, and started public school teaching. That was my first professional, paid work, so I guess you can call that my first real career.

Darren: How long were you teaching English?

Verna: It lasted three years: first, I taught seventh grade; then I taught seniors; and the third year, I taught at State University College in Buffalo. It was there that I became involved in a five-year College Change Team project sponsored by the National Training Laboratories and it included human relations training in small groups. This in turn led to a four-year paid career as curriculum designer/coordinator/ record keeper for a Model Cities grant-funded public service agency called the Center for Human Services Training. The Center was dedicated to career-ladder training of mental health paraprofessionals in Buffalo, NY. And so began the transition of my HRD practitioner endeavors from the context of schools to the contexts of public and business sector organizations. There, I concluded that, as a mature and experienced adult already working professionally among those with a Ph.D, it was time to go back to earn my own doctoral degree.

Darren: How difficult was it to go back into education, especially when also looking after your family?

Verna: That was a serious rite of passage. I had become head of my large household, with several of the older children in college, and I had to choose a degree program that would allow me to work days and go to school at nights. And so I signed on to a program in instructional design and management at SUNY Buffalo. It was a thoughtful, creative, and rigorous program that allowed side excursions to develop our own strengths and specialties. We

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were a community of scholar-practitioners, learning with and from each other, as in Reg Revans' *action learning* formulation that I discovered later. The most exciting courses for me were studies of human communication, electives in psychology, and the very centerpiece of the curriculum: General System Theory. Ludwig von Bertalanffy, the theoretical biologist, had been a ground-breaking professor at SUNY Buffalo and he had died shortly before I started my studies in the early 1970s. His influence was still potent, dispersed throughout the university. Here, at last, I had authority for the systems thinking I believe I was born into and, together with a course in cognitive modeling, I had found my foundation for all the professional work I was to do henceforth in HRD. My doctoral dissertation was a cognitive modeling of creativity as a special case of General System Theory, and this strategic combination has enabled me to corral the main ingredients I later used to research and constitute the degree programs in HRD at Georgia State University. I finished my PhD in 1977.

Darren: What happened to your career after completing your PhD?

Verna: I graduated from SUNY Buffalo in August 1977 and, although I did two interviews for faculty positions, it was too late to find a job in the U.S. So my major professor and dissertation chair had contacts in the Middle East. He used his influence to get me a job at the University of Qatar as an associate professor. The reason for that is because I had taught for him one whole year while he was on sabbatical leave. I was hired to teach curriculum development in English as a Second Language and to act as a supervisor of student teachers of English in the Qatari secondary schools. I taught both men and women, but I could only supervise in the women's schools. Here, the instructional design side of my doctoral program really came in handy, as it did later on when I was in Indonesia assisting teachers in higher education how to translate broad, general descriptions of courses into articulated programs and

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lesson plans. Despite some initial hitches, I loved working in an international environment, became an ardent photographer and, surprisingly to me, a lover of the desert and the Gulf cultural milieu.

Darren: How long did you work in Qatar, and what came next?

Verna: I was there for two years. In the third year, they wanted me to stay. But I couldn't. I had a daughter that needed to be starting high school. So I interviewed by mail with the manager of training at Manufacturer's and Trader's Trust Company Bank in Buffalo. I was shortly promoted to Banking Officer and manager of corporate training and development. I felt that I was turning "training" into something more systemic, strategic and effective and I had proven to myself that I could make the translation from school-based to business-driven learning and organization development. I stayed with the bank through hostile takeover, mergers, and bank deregulation.

Darren: Do you remember why you left the bank?

Verna: I was let go after seven years. There was new management, and every single senior officer, every single executive officer was replaced. My boss was an executive VP with an HR person reporting to him. My HR person was supportive of me. The executive VP was not. He was gone soon after I was gone. So essentially, I had no management support. He brought in his own people. There was not a good fit anymore. Besides, I was past 60 years old. So I didn't fit with the new people. Within two weeks of my leaving, I had a job with World Bank as a consultant to higher education in Indonesia. You know, as I look back at my career, there is an interesting pattern of unemployment followed by international ventures.

Darren: What was your work in Indonesia?

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Verna: My job there was to teach teachers of instructional design, and to teach graduate students in instructional design. You see, what they would get from the government is a very brief description of what the course should be. Essentially, they had no idea where to start except to maybe get somebody's book somewhere. I had to use an interpreter, and one of the ways I handled the language problem was that I managed to get four students, who were teachers in the undergraduate programs, who had been abroad for studies. So they were good in English. And we did model projects of course development design with them. Then they served as my assistants. That was a good experience. I was there for 13 months, in 1987 and 1988.

Darren: I know that you joined Georgia State in 1988. How did that come about?

Verna: It was time to resume my academic career. I supposed that my time in international consulting in education and HRD was ending then. There was no work in sight after the Indonesia project, and I had my family to feed and mortgage to pay. Strangely, things began to come together for me when I least expected it. While I was in Indonesia, an American happened to have a copy of the Chronicle of Higher Education. I saw an ad for a job at Georgia State University. They wanted a practitioner, somebody with a PhD, and someone who could design an HRD degree program. That was me. So I applied, flew myself back for the interview, and got hired. I then went back to Indonesia, finished the work, and started at GSU in the fall of 1988.

Darren: So your academic career started quite late on?

Verna: I was nearly 62 years of age when I was hired for my first tenure track position. I was charged with creating the best HRD university program in the country. The challenge was fantastically inviting because I had some pretty definite ideas about what HRD should be but wasn't, and here was my big chance to see what I could do about it. I was given carte blanche to

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redefine the field and designate suitable academic preparation for it in a systemic way. When students began flocking to the degree programs I designed, that's when I felt justified in believing I was good at what I was doing as a professor.

Darren: How did you go about building a new HRD program?

Verna: I designed all the programs and wrote the curriculum for bachelor's, master's and doctoral level. I had trouble with the doctoral level because there was somebody there that thought he sort of owned it. But I had a mandate to build the best HRD program in the country, so that all got worked through the academic approval committees. The biggest problem was that HRD doesn't really belong in any of the departments because it is so multi-disciplinary. First, we were in the vocational department, kind of like Dick Swanson's program in Minnesota. Then we were in the education department because I was determined that it was not going to be in the business college where Ph.D. students are required to be in residence as full-time students. That could not accommodate our working, practitioner constituency. Then we were in the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, and we didn't quite fit there either. But then, they gradually phased out the PhD. HRD does not sit gently in academia.

Darren: When was the PhD phased out?

Verna: There was a competing program in public administration that was being developed and was competing for funds and resources. That was a joint program between Georgia Tech and Georgia State University. They were in the throes of developing and hiring for that. It was a big undertaking. The second factor was that we had too small of an HRD faculty. They felt that we really could not manage three degree programs with three faculty. And they were right. But the PhD was the one I wanted least to let go of. Even after then, our master's program continued strong.

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Darren: So how did the Georgia State journey come to an end?

Verna: I retired from GSU in 2004, after 16 years of program development, 25 doctoral students completed and a like number of doctoral students whose committees I had served upon but not chaired. I knew the program was in its death throes. I left just before it died.

Darren: As we have walked through your career journey, it strikes me that you have had to face and overcome a lot of different challenges along the way.

Verna: The biggest challenges for me have always been overcoming credibility issues. As an older woman but a new professor, I was expected to have already a great publishing record, even though I was actually in my very first tenure track position. I got none of the course relief and department help that other new professors got, and had to figure everything out for myself. The same held true when I won a \$400,000 contract to research national laboratory training issues for HIV-AIDS identification and monitoring at labs around the country. I was a complete novice, but got little assistance from people who had been through the ropes and knew how to plan staffing and sub-contacting on federal contracts. I had a complicated design for extensive survey research and qualitative interviews in 40 labs with three levels of personnel. It nearly killed me. Another constant frustration was the lack of credence many departments gave to research that was based on verbal rather than numerical data. Doing qualitative research is hard enough, and yes, I had to do a lot of reading and research to learn those methods, but doing research through conceptual model-building is nearly unheard of, as is text analysis; all things I am strong in. So I really wearied of having AHRD reviewers say my research designs were not strong enough. They simply did not know what they were looking at or talking about.

Darren: So what have you been doing since retirement? I can't imagine at all that you sit around with nothing to do each day.

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Verna: I might have fallen into that, but I didn't. Lex Dilworth would not allow me to. He got me involved in writing chapters on two books on action learning, history of evolution and applications. Those were published in the Spring of 2010 by Palgrave Macmillan. Through him, I'm sure, I got an invitation to attend the Global Forum for Executive Development through Business-Driven Action Learning last year and also this year. In June 2009, Lex posthumously and I were recipients of the first awards from the Global Forum for lifetime work.

Darren: As you mention the Global Forum, can I ask what roles professional associations and conferences have played in your development?

Verna: One of the first professional conferences I went to was the Society for General Systems Research while I was a student at SUNY. It would have been in the 1970s. Later, in 1979, I believe it was, the conference for the silver anniversary of the Society for General Systems Research was held in London. I presented there and heard Sir Geoffrey Vickers and Sir Stafford Beer debate. Later, I came to realize when I met Reg Revans that he and Stafford Beer were at the same university and knew each other well. So Revans was a systems thinker. A lot of people miss that notion. In fact, I met Reg Revans at the first conference of AHRD in San Antonio. Victoria Marsick had connected Reg with Lex Dilworth, and they hit it off fabulously, and Lex invited him to that first AHRD conference.

Darren: I know that you were very active in the early years of AHRD. How did that come about, and what was your role?

Verna: I was a member of ISPI, the International Society for Performance Improvement, when I was at school. Then, when at Georgia State, I was kind of a member of ProfNet, which used to be the professor's group at ASTD. That pretty much disbanded because we wanted our own academy. It was at a ProfNet meeting in Atlanta when we decided to do the chartering of

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the new organization, the Academy of Human Resource Development. Of course, Wayne Pace was highly instrumental in that process. He had done a lot of background and research in how to get it going. So our charter member certificates were signed in Atlanta by Wayne as our first AHRD president. We established the board and the program planners, the officers and all of that. I was on the first board, and I presented, I believe, at every conference except the last one or two before I retired. So I must have presented at about eight or nine straight academy conferences.

Darren: When you reflect back on your career, what are you most proud of?

Verna: Much of what I am most proud of was highlighted in the profile about me that was distributed at the 2009 San Jose conference of the Global Forum for Executive Development Through Business-Driven Action Learning. It referenced my contribution to a major structural and strategic change in organizations with the introduction of the Chief Learning Officer (CLO) at executive team level. It also referenced the graduate degree programs I built and implemented at GSU. Above all, they acknowledged my steady commitment to life-long learning across five continents and in schools, universities, community-based human services, government agencies, citizen groups, and corporate entities. I wish I could have said all of this half so well.

Darren: It sounds like you learned a lot from your many different experiences, and that those influenced your perspective and approach. Which events do you think had the most influence?

Verna: Certainly the teaching years at State University College of New York, including my involvement in human relations training and work with the campus change team. That was a whole new era of understanding for me in terms of self-development, open communication, telling it like it is, and the t-groups. I learned a great deal about myself and others. I think I learned equally about other people and that what they appear to feel toward you or towards

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someone else is not necessarily what's there. It was an awareness that developed over time. Also, I learned a lot from my international work. Before I went to Qatar, a friend of mine had said that I'd be good at it. But I didn't believe that because I'd never been outside the country except to Canada. And finding out that was really true, that it's possible to develop empathy and understanding of completely different cultures is exciting to do. That was good. It was very self-affirming. But I think what I was most excited about was actually working with the faculty and staff at the Technical University in Yamoussoukro on the Ivory Coast. I used an action learning approach with them. It was a way of learning that they very much enjoyed, and they could draw from their own cultural heritage to get involved in. In other words, it wasn't a Western process anymore than it was an African process. My whole experience in Africa made me very much more confident that I could initiate things; that I didn't have to be bound by a formula, a funding source sort of formula. I got from that, more than anything else, the bravery and courage, and the confidence for risk-taking behavior.

Darren: Looking back at your career and the lessons you have learned, what advice would you give to those who are now starting their careers in HRD?

Verna: The advice I would give anyone seeking to enter the field of HRD is to expect the unexpected, know thyself, read relevant literature both theoretical and research-oriented, and talk with practitioners and academics in a wide range of settings. It will take a while to catch on to the fact that HRD is a profession separate from HRM, and that it is wildly multi-disciplinary. Most critical of all is that they develop an understanding that training does not equal HRD, for HRD has much more responsibility than that. HRD asks, "How do people learn?" And then HRD sets the stage for learning to happen through research, development, and negotiated expectations.

Darren: Earlier in the interview, you mentioned Chief Learning Officers, and I would like to focus a little on that. Could you tell me about the background to how the concept came about?

Verna: In my seven years at the bank, I became extremely frustrated because there were so many levels between me and the chief executive. My immediate superior said that he had not worked with anyone who knew more about training development than I did. So it was this complete mismatch between my knowledge, what I could do for them, what they believed and what they were willing to accept, particularly the assumptions they were making about me as an elderly woman. So it came about in part because of deep frustration about the lack of position power. You know there are many kinds of power, but I had no position power. I read in every training and development and HRD magazine about how we had to influence people. We had to do this all by our own personal influence, by return on investment and all that drill. I finally said to myself that nothing will do this except position power. You have to be up there on the executive team. I also became extremely frustrated with the fact that so many of the people who were offering their services as consultants were just public speakers. They knew nothing about how people learned. They were thought to be grand because people came away with feel-good things. But there was no retention. I even did some research to see that they couldn't even remember a week later what they had been trying to learn. So that's when the idea of the Chief Learning Officer came to mind. If there is a Chief Financial Officer, who is in charge of physical and capital assets. Then there should be an equivalent in charge of human assets. So what we need is a Chief Learning Officer.

Darren: How did the Chief Learning Officer idea develop from your initial thinking into mainstream HRD?

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Verna: It was in 1991. I was writing for the University Council, which sort of preceded AHRD. It was really not the same thing as the ProfNet, but had many of the same people in it. We were meeting annually. I wrote this article, and I remember that Gary MacLean liked it. Everybody was talking about learning organizations, and my article called for the creation of a Chief Learning Officer position to lead its creation. That was the gist of the article, and it was published in the second volume of Human Resource Development Quarterly (Willis, 1991).

Darren: Do you remember what the reaction was to the article within the HRD community?

Verna: Hardly any. I did make a presentation on it at the conference. I guess the people that attended my presentation were interested. But there was no aftermath, except for Gary May. He liked the idea, and he became the first person to carry the title of Chief Learning Officer. Sometime later, I went to the third annual Chief Learning Officer Conference. Gary May and I went as participants, and the attendees there had never heard of me. The concept grew, and it grew and it grew. Then Dede Bonner edited a book about leading knowledge management and learning (Bonner, 2000), and she accepted and believed Gary and I when we said that it originated with us. Gary contributed the notion that taking the HRD out of HR was analogous to taking information technology out of finance departments, that it just got too big, too complicated, and too different. That was Gary's insight. I never would have thought of that.

Darren: Have you stayed connected with the concept of Chief Learning Officer?

Verna: Not in writing. There was a time when somebody else in AHRD had arranged for the Chief Learning Officer from Whirlpool to come in and make a keynote speech. He was going to introduce her. Apparently, someone on the board said, "That should be Verna's job." So he stepped aside and I introduced her. We also had a panel presentation at the ASTD conference,

and there were Chief Learning Officers there. Otherwise, I don't actually know how it has grown, except that they did have that Chief Learning Officer conference. Of course, I never really laid it aside because it's my baby.

Darren: As we have discussed your career, it is apparent that events clearly influenced you and your career journey. When you look back, who were the key people who also also influenced your development and approach?

Verna: I have had exceptional teachers, professors, and work colleagues without whom I would be a lesser person than I am now. I have learned with and from so many people, about so many things that if I were to list all the significant influences, the list would be pages long. So I will just stick to professional influences that in my view are directly relevant to HRD. First, there are several people from the NTL Network from whom I learned important lessons in human relations. Most, like Charles Seashore and Walter Sykes, were encountered during the College Change Team project at SUCB. Dr. Richard Meisler, hired at the College as a campus change agent and placed in charge of Freshmen and Transfer Programs, was quick to pull me into student advising and into the T-Group and action research processes. These gave me first-hand experience with facilitating problem-solving groups, opening up multi-directional communications on campus, and expanding student services. In these years, I became knowledgeable about Kurt Lewin's work, and became one of those who spent an intensive two weeks doing team development and risking personal growth at the NTL facility in Bethel, Maine. Later, I was influenced by the learnings from Marvin Weisbord's consulting skills workshop. Then there was Dr. Taher Razik, my major professor at SUNY Buffalo. He came to believe in me, and made me both his survey research assistant and his graduate teaching assistant, arranging my hours so that I could still earn money in other ways. He then used his contacts to

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negotiate a faculty post for me at the University of Qatar when I was at a loss to determine next steps after graduation. The next two people who entered my life as major professional influences were Professors Reginald Revans and Robert “Lex” Dilworth, both serving to introduce me to the principles of action learning at the first conference of the Academy of Human Resource Development in San Antonio. For me, action learning was the most systemic, most strategic and most democratic of all the HRD strands I had encountered over the years. In my bank days, I was so often disappointed by the lack of participant internalization and application of learning, even when the instructional designs were impeccable and the consultants conscientious and experienced. What emerged for me from hearing about action learning was that it is systemic, self-organized, self-directed, and capable of capitalizing on everyone’s tacit and explicit knowledge to solve real, stubborn, recurring problems. If there is such a thing as a crystallization of one’s professional wisdom regarding the field they practice in, then I would have to say that engaging in action learning offers the best odds for crystal formation and precipitation. Lex and I both became convinced of the efficacy of action learning, shared qualitative research projects, and co-authored papers and a book that some consider a “first reader” for initiates to the action learning process.

Darren: As you mention that, it leads me to think about all of the projects and people you have been associated with over the years. I was wondering how you decided which projects to get involved with, given that you have limited time and energy?

Verna: It’s the one that gets me excited. That seems to open a new horizon or to further my own desire for learning. That’s how I choose colleagues, too, I suppose, or they choose me. It’s a mutual kind of thing; that we can learn together. We can do this. Perhaps we can’t do it separately, but we can join our efforts and something good will come from it.

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Darren: I'm conscious of the time and I want to make sure we talk a bit about life outside of HRD. It sounds as if family is a large part of your life outside of HRD. How did you find a way then of balancing work and family? That must have been a challenge.

Verna: Family certainly is a large part of my life, and I managed to balance work and family with great difficulty. My family is dispersed across the West Coast, Florida, and Maine, so I don't spend a lot of time with them. But I'm a Victorian letter writer, I guess. I even have trouble keeping e-mails short. To achieve a balance, I did everything from pushing the cradle with my foot while I was typing my master's thesis to having my 14-year-old daughter shut me in my room and say, "Don't come out until you've got it finished," with my dissertation. She minded if I even came out for a cup of coffee. She was so sick of the whole thing. It was especially tough because I was a single parent for most of those years. And certainly, my housework suffered.

Darren: How was the family impacted by all of the international work that you did?

Verna: I didn't start that until Lisa, my youngest, was 14. She went with me to the Middle East the first year. She's never been the same since. But then, neither have I. It's very eye opening. I found it eye opening in a good sense because it challenges stereotypes. Also, you develop really close friendships if you're open to that. And I don't mean just in the ex-patriot community either. When you're invited into people's homes and you know that they either feel honored, enjoy your company or both. And I feel honored by being asked.

Darren: So have any of your family members followed in your footsteps, in terms of academia, research, HRD or action learning?

Verna: None of those. They have for the most part had higher education. I have five children with bachelor's degrees. Some have gone onto masters. Of the two who didn't continue

onto college, one is an artisan: he restores and also builds hot rod antique autos. He really is an artist and a metalworker, a designer. The other is in college now studying digital imagery technology. She is my youngest child, the one that was 14 when I was in the Middle East. But no, they haven't gone down the same path.

Darren: Going back to the topic of challenges of balancing work and personal life or work and family, you've certainly been amazingly active from a work perspective. Did you find that limited you in terms of having other hobbies or other interests outside of family and work?

Verna: It has limited my pursuing them to the extent that I'd like to. But that has been one of my problems. I have been so interested in so many different things. There are pieces of things left undone all over the place. My mother was a great genealogist, and I have continued with that. I make quilts, but they've been not touched for years now. I learned to crochet. I love to travel and take photographs, and have done a lot of it. I'm just now contemplating buying my first digital camera. I'm kind of reluctant to give up the single lens reflex, though. I've had such good luck with them. I also believe in journaling, which helps me focus my thoughts and spell out my tasks and provides useful reflection. I started when I was in grade school, at about the same time that I became aware of action learning and reflection. While I have journaled off and on pretty much all my life, I have sustained it constantly since the mid-1990s. I never go traveling without my journal. It isn't just a travel journal, either.

Darren: To change topic a little, I would like to ask about what's next? What else do you still hope to achieve? Is there something you would particularly like to achieve or something you'd particularly like to focus your energies on?

Verna: I used to garden, but now I have artificial knees, so I don't do much of that anymore. I would like to write professionally, perhaps a memoir or personal essays, which have

the aspect of a memoir but don't necessarily follow an autobiographical chronology. Although writing is a little challenging at the moment as I have two family members living with me. I also want to finish things that are lying about partly finished. I might even like to do some exhibitions of photographs. I was part of an exhibit in Qatar, in one of the hotels there, which included some of my enlargements and I very much enjoyed that.

Darren: The photography sounds fascinating. What do you enjoy photographing?

Verna: I photograph whatever interests me. I did a lot of mosque towers in Qatar. I did little plants in the sand. I think the photography actually led me to appreciate the desert more. I saw things that I otherwise wouldn't have seen. While I was there, my daughter and I were taught to photograph portraits, and that's something else I like very much. When we were in the Middle East, of course, we did a lot of asking people if they were willing to be photographed. I also enjoy taking photographs of architecture, and animals; I suppose I have photographed a cat in every land I've ever lived in, too.

Darren: Verna, unfortunately the time has come to wrap up our conversation. I have really enjoyed our time together and hearing more about your career and personal interests. Thank you for your time. It has been so good to re-connect, and I wish you well with your current and next ventures.

Implications

As stated earlier in this paper, the purpose of the paper is to learn about one person, and then to later examine themes that cut across interviews. However, I would like to highlight a few questions that emerged during the conversations with Verna in the hope that they prompt reflection and learning:

1. How does your childhood upbringing influence your approach to HRD and to research?
2. What lessons have you learned from living and/or traveling abroad, and how do those influence your approach to HRD?
3. In what ways have doors closing in your career (for example, being released from a job) led to unexpected doors opening?
4. What major new products or concepts have you created in your work that you have needed to pass on to others, and do you now stay connected to them or did you choose to move on?

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The interview with Verna Willis is part of a series of interviews published at conferences and in journals that focus on key individuals who have influenced training, organizational development, and related fields.

To find out more about the series, contact Darren at dazinseattle@aol.com